

12-1-2001

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Recommended Citation

Rinehart, S. D. (2001). Establishing Guidelines For Using Readers Theater With Less-Skilled Readers. *Reading Horizons*, 42 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol42/iss2/1

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Establishing Guidelines For Using Readers Theater With Less-Skilled Readers

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The author reviews recent research findings concerning the benefits of readers theater for building oral reading accuracy and fluency and then identifies key guidelines for instructional implementation. Recommendations and conclusions place the focus on guidelines for classroom teachers who might want to experiment with readers theater as they work with children who face reading difficulties.

LIKE A NUMBER OF OTHER reading teachers, I have witnessed first hand some of the classroom benefits of readers theater. I have seen students gain fluency on practiced text and excitement for the chance to read aloud before others. Past support for taking valuable instructional time for readers theater activities has rested mostly on anecdotal evidence, tangential research, or what some might feel is common sense. However, several studies have recently presented more empirical reasons for why readers theater is good practice for all readers, including those who are struggling. The intent of this paper is to highlight these findings and clarify key instructional principles. In addition, the emphasis will be placed particularly on the importance of these guidelines for teachers who might want to experiment with readers theater as they work with children who are facing reading difficulties.

Opportunities for successful reading

To improve, struggling readers need ample opportunities for successful reading (Allington, 1983, 2001; Clay, 2002). Like all readers, they need a chance to read text that contains words that they have come to know or are in the process of learning, to experience fluency with many books, and to even reach a level of independence with some examples. Such opportunities are important because engaged and sustained reading leads to improved word recognition, gains in fluency, and hopefully a burgeoning of confidence. From an anecdotal viewpoint, one gets better by doing, and poor readers need a chance *to do*. And from a theoretical viewpoint, readers need to gain automaticity with orthographic processes and familiarity and repeated readings may enhance these kinds of gains (Dowhower, 1987; Rasinski, 1990; Reutzel & Hollingsworth, 1993; Samuels, 1979). This concept underlies in some respect what has been called the "Matthew effect" (Stanovich, 1986). In this Biblical analogy the rich get *richer*. That is, the good readers get better because their continued success in literacy activities not only sustains but also generates its own improvements and growth. But the poor get *poorer*. That is, poor readers fall even farther behind because, in part, the difficulty itself becomes an impediment for practice. Thus, their gains are slower overall. It is ironic indeed that in some school contexts those readers who need so much more practice may be the very children who have fewer chances to succeed (Allington & Walmsley, 1995).

Motivation and confidence are also important factors in this equation (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzone, 1996). Struggling readers often fear the frequent mistakes that seem to accompany their reading efforts and they may become ever more reluctant to take risks when reading. Chronic failure and frustration have diminished their reading self-concept, patience, and initiative. Conversely, chances for sustained and successful reading increase the likelihood that poor readers may develop more patience with reading, gain some confidence with their own attempts, and tap into some interest to bolster continued initiatives. When children are motivated and when they feel supported in their efforts, they are more likely to engage in greater reading challenges.

Then what children with reading difficulties need will involve more successful opportunities to read, not fewer -- and part of what today's reading teachers seek out are additional, effective, and meaningful ways to integrate such advantages into the instruction. Recent studies have indicated that readers theater activities may offer some promise for this kind of additional practice for less-skilled readers. As many teachers are aware, readers theater basically involves choosing or preparing scripted text, practicing to read that text aloud, and then interpreting the text for an audience. The instructional intent of readers theater involvement is to not only enhance accurate oral reading but to also model and encourage effective phrasing and reading expression. The readers theater performance offers a potential, at least, to bring dialogue and characters to life through combinations of verbal and visual expression (Sloyer, 1982).

Attempts to include readers theater experiences can be seen commonly in elementary classrooms, and sometimes in special instructional contexts like Title I or special education. As stated previously, several recent studies have shared evidence concerning its potential benefits. The purpose of this article is to briefly review those findings and then identify and discuss some instructional guidelines for teachers to consider. Experienced teachers may want to use such guidelines as a means to reflect on their own approaches to readers theater, while teachers who have not used readers theater previously with struggling readers but want to experiment may want to begin with these guidelines and suggestions.

Research support

Three recent studies have explored the usefulness of readers theater activities. Although the instructional contexts differ in interesting ways, all three studies report positive influences from readers theater involvement. I will briefly describe the results of each study and then highlight some common benefits and issues from across the studies.

Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1999) integrated 30 minutes of readers theater instruction into the daily plans for two second-grade classrooms. As part of their literacy instruction over a 10-week period, the children in these classrooms practiced and performed story scripts adapted from trade books. Data for the children participating in the readers theater activities were compared to data for children in a control group. The authors report apparently greater gains in reading rate (words per minute) for readers theater participants on unrehearsed stories from the same or similar series used in the practice groups. There were also pre-post gains in reading levels on an informal reading inventory. More children in the readers theater activities made instructional level gains on the inventory than did children in the control group. The researchers also used a 5-point scale to rate student's oral reading fluidity, phrasing, and expressiveness. Their analysis documented more likely improvement for children in the readers theater group.

I was a more direct witness of two additional investigations. The first study (Rinehart, 1999) took place in a university-based clinical tutorial intended for children facing reading difficulties. Graduate students in an M.A. Reading Specialist program completed a capstone, supervised practicum as part of their program requirements. Each graduate student took responsibility for the instruction of an elementary student. Completed during the summer, the tutoring took place four mornings per week for 5 weeks and involved individual tutoring, as well as small group and daily whole group instruction, during 1 1/2 hours of allotted time. The primary purpose of the study was to see if readers theater could be included successfully in a tutorial and what benefits might emerge. Findings demonstrated that readers theater could be incorporated successfully into a multi-faceted tutorial. Teachers were able to integrate readers theater practice and other instructional activities.

For example, the potential text for readers theater came from previous guided and recreational reading activities. Repeated reading activities, such as echo reading and the like, could be incorporated for some of the practice essential for readers theater. Students and teachers alike soon came to value the activities. The tutors and observers particularly emphasized the benefits to gains in reading accuracy and dialogue expression on targeted text and to reader participation and motivation.

In a related study, readers theater served as the major instructional method for increasing reading ability during Title I instruction (Millen and Rinehart, 1999). For 9 weeks, second-grade Title I students practiced reading and performing scripted stories, focusing on one per week. Additional instruction involving word recognition, fluency, and comprehension was integrated each week, using the same material. Children who participated in the readers theater activities made relatively greater gains than did children in a control group on measures of oral reading accuracy and comprehension from a common reading inventory, with the less-skilled readers finding the greatest gains. Like the children described in the two studies above, these children became enthusiastic about practice and performance. Their classroom teachers also observed that they made gains in reading ability and motivation that transferred to regular classroom literacy activities.

Benefits across the studies

Each of the three studies presents unique support for readers theater involvement. However, several important findings cut across these three studies. Of overall importance, readers theater did emerge as an effective method for involving children in meaningful reading activities. These robust benefits were seen for children with a range of reading proficiency in a multi-subject elementary classroom, as well as for struggling readers in Title I and clinical contexts. Likewise, the effectiveness of the method endured noticeable variations in material and classroom context and was documented through both quantitative and qualitative support.

There was also evidence of skill transfer. Improvements in oral reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension were seen on both

targeted (practiced and performed) material and on new material. Enthusiasm, patience, and interest also appeared to transfer generally to other reading activities.

It was possible to include readers theater with few additional expenses or disruptions. No special material was necessary, as trade books were successfully scripted and used for the instruction in all three studies. In addition, readers theater pursuits complemented other classroom goals and activities, an important point of advantage for a method bound to consume a share of classroom time.

Finally, teachers and children alike came to value readers theater and the opportunity to read aloud to others. Teachers appeared to value it because they saw the benefits to reading performance and attitude, and children appeared to value it because they found it to be enjoyable and because they were able to read in front of their peers.

The findings from these studies can serve to illustrate particular teaching guidelines for others who may want to experiment with readers theater. Again, the intent is to keep the struggling readers in mind as I identify some points of instruction.

Readers theater and struggling readers

Adapting trade books and integrating activities. In all three studies children read scripts successfully adapted from trade books. In the classroom-based study, for example, researchers selected trade books from series of books by the same authors. In the other two studies, the scripts were adapted from a wider sample. The clinic-based text was particularly diverse, with examples ranging from controlled, beginning reading stories to Shel Silverstein's poetry to children-created stories. Regardless, no purchases of "special" material were necessary in any of the scenarios. Thus, one basic principle is that a teacher who wants to include readers theater does not have to obtain specially prepared material to have the appropriate text but can choose text that emerges from the life of the classroom.

With the books already present in the activities of classroom, the first step would be to choose possible stories or parts of stories that could be scripted. Of course some story features would facilitate the adaptation. Stories with straightforward plots and interesting dialogue would be helpful to the revision and to the performance. Some stories, on the other hand, that call for more action than dialogue may not be the best choices, since the practice and performance will emphasize oral reading accuracy and expression, rather than drama and props.

The incorporation of *known* books will be particularly advantageous for teachers working with struggling readers. Children might eventually be in a position to help choose or suggest likely sources for future readers theater texts. Furthermore, a book recycled from previous experiences arrives with the embedded familiarity that benefits the confidence and prior knowledge of the struggling reader.

In the clinic-based and Title I studies, teachers particularly were able to integrate the readers theater material within a broad array of other reading and writing activities. For example, support activities such as shared book experiences, guided reading, and echo reading all presented ways to support and practice readers theater text. Even recreational reading and language experience offered sources for readers theater ideas.

Reading levels and manageable text. Text difficulty will most certainly influence the likelihood of a child's reading success. A book that is too easy does not provide interest, challenge, or practice opportunities that are desired. A book with a reading level that is beyond a child's grasp not only causes frustration but wastes instructional time. The researchers and teachers in these studies attempted to provide reading material that fell within each child's instructional level. Of course, a *range* characterizes the instructional level of each child. Such a range can be stretched somewhat, depending on instruction and purpose. This range commonly referred to as a *zone of proximal development*, underlies an important principle if the teacher intends to involve struggling readers successfully in readers theater opportunities. Like other children, less-skilled readers present a range of ability in their instructional level, but the range can be tempered critically by a number

of factors to remember. Such readers might need more intensive facilitation during the introduction of a book, as well as additional support and practice to reach the oral reading level needed to perform the text. The teacher must weigh the challenge of the text against the time necessary and the accompanying goals for oral reading and student success. The level of the text can be lowered somewhat through script recasting or tempered through assignment of parts, but it would be better to choose a text that fits more dynamically into all of the possible ways to recycle the book. Choosing a book that is not manageable, no matter how much it might be practiced, is not an effective way to launch readers theater. In short, the teacher should choose material, while not necessarily limited to the *traditional* reading level of the student, is still within the reach of the student, with appropriate support. Such a task itself can lead to more assessment about what the student can reach and under what circumstances but teachers will be wise to remember the value of success for students who have already met more than their share of failure.

Performance incentive. Readers theater is not complete without a chance to perform the script. The routine from all three studies led to the performance and students and teachers alike came to value the chance. It clearly became a very strong incentive for some children who had been previously reluctant to do any oral reading before their peers.

So often struggling readers do not have a chance to read aloud fluently before other students. Their past episodes may be filled with frustration or embarrassment. In the same regard, a readers theater performance by itself does not ensure that successful reading will take place. The teacher and children must assess their progress and readiness for the event. These findings show that struggling readers benefit from participating in this assessment, monitoring what it means to be "ready" and having some say in when that time has come. Likewise, a post-performance assessment would help teacher and children reflect on how the performance went, how the audience responded, how fluent and expressive they were with their parts, and what they might want to prepare and perform next.

The role of practice. One of the major instructional benefits of readers theater came through multiple readings of the text. Teachers and students alike came to the realization that practice was indispensable. Past studies have also pointed to the importance of repeated reading for gains in oral reading proficiency (e.g., Dowhower, 1987), as well as to related skills, such as comprehension, when some of the orthographic stumbling blocks have been removed.

The findings also presented evidence that the opportunity to practice led some children to reconceptualize their definition of *good* reading. As instruction, modeling, and feedback were translated into improvements in accuracy and expression, students gained greater confidence. They also gained insights into what expressive reading involved and that practice and perseverance might end up in a successful performance that others would appreciate. They learned that they too could read well if they prepared, if they practiced. Teachers will wisely remember that one of the basic aims of using readers theater in the first place was to provide their struggling readers with the opportunity for sustained reading practice.

A chance for success and motivation. The success that came through the practice and performance heightened the children's interest in reading, their willingness to practice, and their enthusiasm for performance. Such results were clear across all three studies and should be noteworthy for teachers who work with poor readers whose confidence and reading self-concept have been encumbered by the daily difficulties they experience. At the same time, readers theater played a substantial part in the week's schedule for these children. Teachers and children spent time with it: modeling, practicing, and performing. While teachers must actively ensure that success is taking place and that children are aware of their own improvements, chances for success and changes in motivation for struggling readers may not emerge immediately or easily.

Conclusions

Readers theater is, indeed, one way to offer meaningful reading experiences to struggling readers. The results from these studies are convincing and strengthen the credibility of the anecdotal support offered up from our classroom colleagues. While there is probably no *right* way to do readers theater, there are some effective ways to proceed. If we listen to the teachers and children from the studies, the guidelines we have identified previously will offer some form to this support. Readers theater is effective because it motivates and challenges children and provides the potential of reward for reading. Because of the nature of readers theater, children also gain much needed practice reading text. This practice helps them to gain fluency and automaticity in reading and assists them in the first step on the way to becoming more successful readers. As many of us have come to recognize, finding that first motivating step can be a challenge.

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